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ABSTRACT

Administrators can acquire a broader range of material drawn from Shakespeare and, by implication, from other great authors as sources for a fuller cognizance of life. The vast field of Shakespearean scholarship and criticism overshadows the works themselves. Nevertheless, adults can rediscover Shakespeare through performances and recreational reading. They approach the plays with their own experiences and find new things to examine. Reading and studying the plays can be pleasurable and personally satisfying. To experience Shakespeare is to see language as art and to see the power of the spoken word. One's construction and interpretation of the play are challenged by each performance. Other appealing aspects of Shakespeare are the complex characters, the play between illusion and reality, and one of the central issues in many Shakespearean plays--the importance of a good reputation. Shakespeare can help administrators realize the uncertainty of existence so they can place their vocations on a more reasonable level of importance. (9 references) (YLB)

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# SHAKESPEARE FOR ADULT EDUCATION DEANS: LESSONS FROM LIBERAL LEARNING

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# SHAKESPEARE FOR ADULT EDUCATION DEANS: LESSONS FROM LIBERAL LEARNING

by Paul J. Edelson, Ph.D.

**Abstract**

This paper describes a personal learning project on Shakespeare conducted by the author that was triggered by a visit to England in 1989. The paper reviews the project's stages inluding self, institutional, and culturally imposed barriers to adult learning. Insights from Shakespeare relative to administrative leadership, especially deaning, are also included.

## Introduction

William Shakespeare's masterful insights into human nature have delighted countless readers and theatregoers for over four centuries. The ability of his characters to transcend their conception in Elizabethan-Jacobean England and speak to us today is a tribute to their universality as complex symbols for how we view ourselves, and even our colleagues. True, we rarely deal with the life and death issues that constitute Shakespearean tragedies, although as administrators it is not uncommon for us to view ourselves as larger than life heroes and heroines, bringing enlightenment and even wisdom to our work settings.

Do we "bestride" our narrow world like Julius Caesar? Or like Portia, is our concern for truth and justice a valued hallmark of our administration? The obsession for power and even ruthlessness we see in others can evoke images of Macbeth and Richard III. Even Othello's susceptibility to flattery and rumor provide a cautionary note to our dealings with colleagues, reminding us of everpresent Iago's. And we all know of indecisive Hamlets; never ourselves!

More often, it is the comedies and their touch of the

burlesque and strange juxtapositions that come closer to mirroring the world we actually inhabit. For example, in observing the fool Touchstone's quarrel "by the book" in As You Like It, in which he recites the ritualized stages of an argument he had with a courtier, it is easy to think of the arcane protocols that govern some of our own interactions.

I am not a Shakespearean scholar by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, it is only within the past year that I have immersed myself in these works- almost thirty years since high school when the plays were an established part of the curriculum. As an avid reader of books on adult education, management, and higher education administration I find Shakespeare's dramas refreshingly revealing and entertaining. Most of all I enjoy the many shadings of human nature and motivation he imparts to his characters. This complexity and subtlety is in sharp contrast to how we tend to view people and situations in real life where there is pressure to simplify our decisionmaking and to reach a quick judgment on some event or person. As administrators we need to act, cutting the Gordian knot, often without knowing the full range of details or implications on issues relating to budget, personnel or programs. Reading Shakespeare I can vicariously savor the complexity of life I strive to reduce within my own sphere of responsibility. For these and other reasons, to be addressed later in this paper, I recommend a reacquaintance with the Bard of Avon. "Lead on Macduff and damn be he who first cries hold, enough!"

**Shakesperotics and the Shakespeare Project**

Gary Taylor in Reinventing Shakespeare (1989) coins the term "Shakesperotics" to refer to the entire corpus of writings on Shakespeare. There were almost 5,000 bibliographic entries in 1986 alone (p. 306). Harry Levin in the "General Introduction" to The Riverside Shakespeare (1974, p.1), considered the most authoritative American edition of Shakespeare's works, suggests that writings on or about Shakespeare occupy more library space than any other author. Shakespeare is an exploding nova, providing heat, light, and energy

to latter day authors who are inspired by his plays. The title of Aldous Huxley's Brave New World was induced by lines in the Tempest - "O brave new world that has such people in't" and that of William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury was drawn from several lines spoken by Macbeth reflecting on his life as "a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing."

Taylor points out that the vast field of Shakespearean scholarship and criticism overshadows the works themselves. This is complicated by an uncertain knowledge of what Shakespeare actually wrote. Several plays may have had joint authorship and there is also a belief shared by some modern scholars that he wrote two versions with different endings to a number of plays including King Lear. In addition, we have trouble with Shakespeare's now archaic language and its ambiguity. Moreover, he did not write the plays in their current forms during his lifetime. Instead, they were written and published by others in the form of guides to actors or "quartos". This practice led to alternative spellings and constructions in different editions. Shakespeare is therefore an imprecise target because of these textual issues. We are not always sure what we are talking about; this is aside from authors and readers ascribing differing interpretations to the plays themselves.

How can a dean of continuing education (who was not an "English major"), a full time administrator, have the temerity to plunge into this Shakespearean sea and risk charges of dilettantism? Barely familiar with the smallest fraction of the scholarship, is it possible to derive more than a superficial appreciation of the works from a "spare time" approach?.

Joseph Papp founder and producer of the New York Shakespeare Festival not surprisingly recommends this strategy of simply reading (aloud) and seeing the plays (Papp, 1988). And there are performances aplenty. This winter holiday season I was able to see Twelfth Night in my little village and As You Like It while a Visiting Scholar at Syracuse University. Library

videotapes made it possible to view Richard III, Henry V, Hamlet, and Julius Caesar and on public television I saw Ran, Kurosawa's interpretation of King Lear with Samurai warriors. A new film version of Hamlet starring Mel Gibson and Glenn Close has just been released and is attracting many who have never before seen a Shakespeare play.

Taylor observes that every age looks at and enjoys (or dislikes) Shakespeare based upon its own values. Within each period people find something new to examine or exhume. Race, gender, and class issues are more important to us now (see Chronicle of Higher Education, 21 November 1990) and trying to understand how Shakespeare addressed these issues reveals much about Shakespeare's period and by contrast, our own. The moral ambiguity in Measure for Measure (a young woman is coerced by her brother to sacrifice her virginity so that he might escape execution; she refuses) created difficulty for Victorians who considered this one of Shakespeare's "problem plays." The contradictions inherent in virtue (virginity) are more appealing in our era of cultural relativism and this play has enjoyed increased popularity compared to the nineteenth century.

I remember, no doubt imperfectly, the Shakespeare of my high school days. The silly romp of A Midsummer Night's Dream. The play was not taught as a kaleidoscopic phantasm of dreams clashing with reality, with strong sexual and almost nightmarish overtones similar to what one might find in certain expressionist or surrealist paintings. Henry IV was presented for the comic relief of Falstaff, not for the human tragedy of civil war nor the conflicting claims of loyalty to family or government. Julius Caesar was a backdrop for Marc Anthony's famed funeral oration, not his problematic character- the savior of Rome or a clever manipulator determined to be on the winning side? These plays were all read by me and my schoolmates as "great literature" that we had to honor and, at times, endure. In high school I was impatiently searching for the play's "action;" not really knowing enough about life at that time to appreciate the ambition of Macbeth, or for that matter Lady Macbeth's.

In college Shakespeare, save for his Sonnets, was not a part of my curriculum at all; at least I can't recall taking a course. Graduate school specialization and the need to choose a profession, and then work, led me to emphasize practicality and a world of work-related readings and writings on such things as administrative techniques. Shakespeare was dead for me. I felt increasingly closed-off from enjoying his dramas. Dealing with the difficult language was simply too much work. To quote Hamlet, "Words, words, words".

Looking back, it was undoubtedly a recent visit to Stratford-on-Avon during a trip to England that put me in touch with that part of Shakespeare I enjoyed many years ago in school. Accident and then deliberate choice set me upon my Shakespeare project, hence this exercise in "Bardolatry", a term coined by G. B. Shaw (Levin, 1974) to describe the awe inspired by Shakespeare.

**The Culture of Expertise and Different Ways of Knowing**

When you work within a research university, you come to realize that every branch of knowledge is or soon becomes the property of skilled experts who study and know a subject in depth. It is therefore not surprising that we may retreat from tackling a new area of learning that is outside of our ken since we too are members of that culture of expertise which skeptically regards claims to knowledge by amateurs as unauthentic.

Personally, I am quick to remind my provost that because of my experience, training, and knowledge I am the only one on our campus who is an authority on adult and continuing education, although others may have taught in the adult education program. Mintzberg in Power In and Around Organizations (1983) identifies this power strategy as the "expertise game" (p. 198ff). It is played in organizations where the structure of influence is based upon pockets of expert information. By that yardstick, the university, with its departmental structure, is a true culture of specialization. Neophyte learning is presumably (but incorrectly) for undergraduates, or night school students. All others are assumed to participate in the

culture of expertise.

In contrast with the academic specialist, the professional, full-time, administrator's world, particularly at the higher levels, is characterized by brevity, variety and fragmentation (Mintzberg, 1973). Superficiality in this realm becomes a virtue. You cannot devote adequate time to learn a great deal about any aspect of your work since by doing so you would assuredly sacrifice your tenuous grasp of the whole.

Perhaps who else but an administrator could dip into Shakespeare and feel confident that whatever little could be gleaned by the non-specialist in a peripatetic sampling could be of value? No master plan was charted, no grand scheme fabricated. I just dipped in and kept reading, utilizing a random approach, looking for connections, and taking advantage of opportunities that arose to see a movie or a performance. I applied my own version of "chaos theory" (Gleick, 1988) reasoning that wherever I started I would be able to identify patterns and themes reasserting themselves in other works.

I approached Shakespeare the way I do administration- with the confidence that I could move through information and be able to make sense of it afterwards, that there would always be more to do, that I would never be done, that writing about it would be a way of learning and would help me place what I have studied in some form of order that would "make sense." I also reasoned that I could find a place to stop simply because I no longer had the time to continue. The project would come to a halt, perhaps to start up again at a later point.

Overall, I subscribed to the belief that I was using my time wisely in this endeavor. It was SHAKESPEARE- the canon. If so many THOUSANDS of writers, critics, and authorities have found him to be important then it was a valid assumption that I would learn something too.

My particular kind of administration is continuing education, so I stand for and symbolize adult education including what are called "personal learning" projects

such as this one on Shakespeare. These are in contrast to formalized adult education which is customarily provided through organized courses. Interestingly, we are offering a graduate course on Shakespeare this term (Spring '91) through the School of Continuing Education but, alas, it is scheduled on the same night as a course I teach, "Principles of Adult Education."

What has been the reaction to my Shakespeare project? A good number of people are either indifferent or hostile to Shakespeare. Yet there are others, like me, who enjoyed Shakespeare in high school and/or college, and apparently also feel some pangs of separation. Perhaps my project will act as a catalyst, leading them to seek a renewed familiarity.

## The Rewards of Shakespeare

So having reviewed motivations for starting this Shakespeare project I will reveal my reasons for continuing. Wanting to complete what I set out to do is part of it. But, foremost, I am finding that reading and studying the plays is a pleasurable experience offering many opportunities for personal satisfaction. I'll go into some of these now in greater depth.

### Language as Art

There is an apocryphal story about the person who enjoyed reading Shakespeare because he used many famous and familiar sayings! This, I am sure, understates the case since so much of Shakespeare has been assimilated within modern English. Recognizing that Shakespeare borrowed freely from other sources- antiquity, folk legends and myths, popular culture and current events- we nonetheless are indebted to him for preserving, if not creating, what have become memorable lines (see H. Levin, 1974) including "The devil can quote scripture" (Merchant of Venice), "Misery makes strange bedfellows" (The Tempest), "Fair is foul, foul is fair" (Macbeth), "In my mind's eye" (Hamlet), and from the same play, "What a piece of work is man," "The play's the thing," and perhaps Shakespeare's most memorable line, "To be or not to be that is the question."

To experience these and other phrases that have now become commonplace in their original contexts produces a satisfaction that may be similar to an archeologist's discovery of a plant or animal that is the forerunner of a contemporary species. A sense of history and of our language being a living thing, descended from an earlier period, endows the words with greater historical richness- especially if the play makes vivid their application. When Richard III exclaims, "Now is the winter of our discontent" that single understated phrase encapsulates all of his frustration and ambition. As the first line in the play, it establishes a theme to which Shakespeare returns again and again, Richard's profound unhappiness and insatiable quest for power that drives him to commit successive murders culminating in his own death.

The dramatic intensity that is an integral part of Shakespeare's writing demonstrates the expressive possibilities and potential of English that we can all access. As a consequence, my interest in writing has grown and I desire to communicate more skillfully and with greater economy.

Shakespeare's drama also highlights the power of the spoken word, inducing in me the same sense of awe I also feel for the "Emancipation Proclamation" and some Churchillian speeches. As a consequence, I think of teaching and all my public speaking in a different way- as opportunities to further develop this subtle art.

When Jacques in <u>As You Like It</u> exclaims "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players" he is referring to the developmental and transitory nature of life. Indeed, we may also choose to self-consciously exploit this thespic dimension in the many roles we play, even giving performances that soar above the commonplace. Scholarly conferences have a dramatic, albeit largely unfulfilled, potential in this regard.

**Varied Ways of Knowing**

When reading the Shakespearean plays, especially for the first time, without benefit of having seen them in

performance, I construct the drama in my mind and thereby create an initial baseline personal interpretation. But even in this so-called "pristine" state I have been influenced by the brief essays prefacing the dramas that appear to be a regular part of almost every edition of Shakespeare, especially those intended for the general public. These introductions are on Shakespeare the man, his times, staging, with basic interpretations of the play, sometimes with a history of the most famous performances. So there has been communicated to me before seeing and reading the play a share of conventional wisdom to which is added my own incomplete understanding.

This socially constructed nature of reality (my "guided" interpretation of the text) can collide with the play when I see it performed and witness the synergy of staging, director, actor, and audience. Although we expect Shakespeare's plays to be faithful to the original we also anticipate that they will be interpretive, leading to a myriad of dramatic possibilities. At the very least, I can expect my preliminary understanding of a play to be challenged by each performance.

Through this incremental process I can build up my knowledge of a play and develop a sense of "connoisseurship"- the ability to make nuanced discriminations- an approach to knowledge that also applies in other aesthetic areas. It is a commendable richness of Shakespeare that his plays can lend themselves to many renditions through the flexible medium of the stage. There are many Shakespeare's, many Hamlets. The audience can also participate in this definition because of the intimate, live, nature of drama and the cumulative knowledge of the plays they bring to each performance. It is a surprise seeing Shakespeare's plays enacted- never knowing what to expect in the interpretation of a character, or how the director chose to stage a scene. Performances can be very minimal with a handful of players on a simple platform, or elaborate panoplies with casts of hundreds.

You may even find a multilayered approach as in the movie of Henry V starring Laurence Olivier which opens with a reenactment of the play as it might have been in Shakespeare's time at the Globe Theatre. The scene then cinematically shifts to the French countryside where the action is outdoors, just before a great battle, and more suited to the possibilities of the cinema.

**Complex Characters**

Characterization is at the heart of what makes Shakespeare appealing. The plays endure because of the fascination we have with the personalities of Hamlet or Brutus, especially our own contradictory feelings for them. In fact, many would argue that the plays themselves have become merely backdrops for the main characters and their memorable speeches. In our own Freudian (and post-Freudian) era we automatically probe psychological depths for insights into behavior, perhaps sometimes forgetting that Shakespeare's characters are not real. At the same time, they are more than theatrical shorthand for a clustering of personality traits in which a Hamlet is viewed as indecisive and Shylock a greedy Jew. Yet, a careful reading of the texts shows these roles as more multidimensional than convention would have it. For example, Hamlet outsmarts his would be assassins Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and arranges for their fatal outcome; he slays Polonius, and Laertes. His reason for not immediately killing Claudius when he came upon him praying was the concern that slaying him by surprise during a moment of apparent repentance, would send Claudius' soul to heaven and not to hell where it truly belongs. Later he dispatches Claudius with zeal.

Many stagings and explications of the Merchant of Venice make Shylock the center of the play- a tragic, if not, noble figure, who loses his daughter, his fortune, and his realism. His excessive greed directed at Bassanio can be seen as a form of revenge in response to pervasive, deeply rooted anti-semitism.

Changing social conditions have also affected our interpretation of other Shakespearean parts. Caliban in

The Tempest is portrayed as half-man, half beast; but also viewed by revisionist directors as a symbol of anticolonialism and black pride. Kate in the Taming of the Shrew is a person victimized by a rigid social code that demands slavish obedience to a husband rather than to her own desires. Interpretations of Kate's role more sympathetic to women's liberation issues are common in the 20th century, rare in earlier periods when the subordinated place of women went largely unchallenged.

Our era, noted for its predilection for moral ambiguity and vacillation between right and wrong finds Marc Anthony, despite his great funeral oration, anything but heroic. With his life at stake, he literally embraces the still blood-stained assassins and then turns on them when the odds are more to his favor. Yet, who, if placed in the same situation might not do exactly the same?

**Illusion and Reality**

The stage is an abstraction, an allusion for life. The characters, though we may see ourselves or others in them, are not real people. And though based upon historical fact, Shakespeare cannot be read as history since he reordered events and people to conform with his special dramatic needs.

On a deeper level, the plays themselves embody aspects of illusion and fraud. Women's parts were played by men and boys. In some plays (Twelfth Night, As you Like It) this is taken a step further and women (who are not women) impersonate men! Part of the action in As You Like It, and A Midsummer Night's Dream takes place in magical forests where human nature is transmogrified The Tempest is set on an exotic tropical island inhabited by a deposed duke, Prospero, who can summon the potent spirit Ariel to do his bidding.

Fairies, masquerades, impersonations, witches, dreams, ghosts, visions, madness, fools - these are all staples of the Shakespearean stage that enable the author to probe deeper into human nature and behavior, revealing motives, and peering more deeply into his characters. The Fool in King Lear makes Lear see how

his vanity prevented him from comprehending that the daughter who loved him most, Cordelia, flattered him least. This tragedy is also remarkable for its play within a play in which familial tension between Lear and his daughters is also present in the relationships the Earl of Gloucester has with his two sons- one good and one deceitful. In both dramas truth is revealed, but only after misrepresentation is ripped away, and also after much pain and suffering.

**The Importance of a Good Reputation**

Given illusion, and misrepresentation in the world, we readily acknowledge that appearance is not necessarily reality. This feature of existence creates a problem for the virtuous person who, nevertheless, wishes to appear good and a challenge for the malevolent who seeks to conceal evil. Separating truth from appearance, and inevitably confusing the two are central features in American life (see Boorstin, 1962). In the area of work, D. Schon writing in The Reflective Practitioner (1983) describes the importance of a benign image and reputation to an executive's performance and observes that if managers are perceived adversely they may suffer a loss of confidence, and their performance may actually suffer.

Creating and sustaining a good reputation is a central issue in many Shakespearean plays. Managing one's image is crucial for maintaining a desirable position with a lord and for future advancement. Listen to Cassio's wail of lament when he is duped by Iago to commit a reckless action placing him in Othello's displeasure- "Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation." It is an irony of Othello that the most famous lines in Shakespeare on the subject of honor and reputation should come from Iago, Shakespeare's blackest villain, who slanders, deceives, and manipulates:

> Good name in man or woman, dear my lord,
> Is the immediate jewel of their souls.
> Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something,
> nothing,

> 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
> But he that filches from me my good name
> Robs me of that which not enriches him
> And makes me poor indeed.

In contrast, Falstaff in Henry IV, Part I, questions whether honor can "set a leg or an arm?" "What is honor?" he asks. "Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died a' Wednesday... Therefore I'll none of it, honor is a mere scutcheon."

Yet hypocritically Falstaff unsuccessfully tries to give the appearance of heroism by taking credit for felling Hotspur who was slain in battle. Preferring to cloak his cowardice with valor Falstaff shows that he too is vulnerable to what others may think of him.

## Conclusions

This paper is about the larger subject of acquiring a broader range of material drawn from Shakespeare and, by implication, from other great authors as sources for a fuller cognizance of life. In particular we can, with Shakespeare's help, overcome the distortions of reality we create and abide in our occupations. Since for many their work-role is at the core of their personal identities, placing work within a more realistic context is a significant accomplishment.

Administrators must contrive a simplified view of actuality in order to lead. We regularly select some goals and suppress others, endorse various courses of action while ignoring alternatives that may be equally valid. Art and literature can help us acknowledge the inherent perplexity of behavior we vainly try to simplify for our purposes of practicality. They also offer an intellectually satisfying arena for experimental and creative thought.

Running through my reading of Shakespeare's plays was the premise that we can come to understand aspects of our world through art. But how we behold life is determined by how we develop and apply our powers of

perception. Shakespeare can give us additional frameworks for interpreting and understanding phenomena, adding to an appreciation of contradictions and uncertainties we cannot always admit within narrow time frames and windows of opportunity.

The liberal arts and Shakespeare reward us for our efforts of concentration and suggest an interpretation of existence as uncertain, unstable, and infinitely convoluted so that we can place our vocations on a more reasonable, if not scaled down, level of importance. With Shakespeare's guidance we can also turn away from a compulsively rational world view that underlines much of administration and welcome a greater sense of art, artifice, irrationality and even play that may be more helpful in dealing with the issues and people we actually encounter. In short, we must retie the Gordian knot so that we may marvel at "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow."

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